

Marketing

You will need to gather information to understand your market.

Market research

How many childcare places are there locally, are there any gaps in the market? e.g. holiday childcare. Information is available in Oxfordshire County Council's [Childcare Sufficiency Assessment](#).

Look at population trends and the demographic of your area. Use [Oxfordshire Insight](#) to access population statistics, unemployment figures and much more.

Carry out your market research, including competitor activity. Use the [Family Information Service](#) postcode search to find out about other early years and childcare providers in your area.

Talking to parents / potential users

Gather information from parents who currently use your service. This can be achieved by using a survey and/or talking to parents individually. You are likely to have a higher return rate if you use a free online platform such as [Survey Monkey](#).

- Questions you may wish to ask include:
- Why did they choose you?
- Does your current offer meet their requirements?
- How did they find out about you?
- Do they follow you on Facebook (if you have a page)?
- How often do they visit your webpages?

Gather information from prospective parents. Ask to attend a local toddler group to promote your pre-school. Gather information using a face to face or online survey. Questions you may wish to ask include:

- When choosing childcare for your child what things will be important to you?
- What time of day/year will you need childcare?

Encouraging and giving your customers the opportunity to provide feedback on a regular basis will keep the organisation informed of any potential issues or gaps in service which may need to be investigated. Complaints and feedback are gold-dust, use them wisely.

Dealing appropriately with customer complaints is crucial because they are a service provider's barometer. When customers feel dissatisfied, they will tell at least a couple of their friends or relations. However, if you have a scheme which encourages, not discourages, customers to complain, you can capture these complaints in order to:

- Put at ease and give explanation or reassurance to the person complaining.
- Reduce the chances of them complaining to someone else.
- Monitor exactly how many dissatisfied customers you have and what the causes are, and that's even more important if you're failing to deliver your mission statement or service offer.
- Take appropriate corrective action to prevent a recurrence.
- Remember your obligations to report serious complaints to Ofsted and, if applicable, the Charity Commission.

Product

In order to effectively market your provision, you need to establish exactly what it is that you are offering parents and children. You can use any information gathered from surveys etc. to ensure this is meeting families' needs. A useful idea is also to look at your setting from a parent's perspective. Think about:

- The facilities you offer
- Quality/Qualifications of the staff
- Philosophy of the provision
- Opening times
- Location
- Flexibility
- Fee structure

Unique selling point

Once you have established your place in the market, decide what it is you offer that makes you stand out - your unique selling point. This can be anything, for example:

- You may be situated on a school site, thus making collecting/dropping off times easier for parents with older children
- You may offer longer opening hours or be more flexible than your competitors
- You may offer more weeks across the year than term time only
- You may offer the option of stretching the Early Education Funding across the year.
- You may have a high adult to child ratio
- Some settings offer additional services, for example a cookery club or dedicated music session. These activities can be held on a day when occupancy rates are low and are a good way to attract additional children to your provision.

Pricing

When considering pricing you need to ensure that the fees charged for your range of services will maintain your long-term sustainability and enable delivery in line with your business plan. Don't be tempted just to undercut your competitors, especially by a large margin, as sometimes low fees are associated with poor service. Key questions to ask are 'Do you provide value for money?' and 'How do you demonstrate that to parents / prospective parents?'

Advertising

The traditional view of advertising has changed for all of us since the advent of social media. Many people will use the internet as a first port of call to find a product or service locally. This makes it increasingly important to make sure your website and Facebook pages are kept up to date. You may even consider opening a [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#) account to communicate with existing and prospective parents.

Parents also use the [Family Information Service](#) to search for childcare. Again, it is important to ensure that your information is kept up to date. Information on how to update your page can be found [here](#)

Advertising ideas

Word of mouth

Positive comments and recommendations can come in different forms. A post on your Facebook page or a face-to-face recommendation between friends. A personal referral is unsurpassed as an advertising tool. It costs nothing and is the most believable type of advertising of all. Encouraging word of mouth referral is therefore a good reason for sustaining excellent customer service and relations. If your customers are pleased with the service you give, they'll tell their friends, share posts on Facebook or may even Tweet about your provision.

Open days

The advantage of personal contact is that you get to talk to your potential customers, which dramatically increases the chances of getting your message across. But there is a limit to how many people you can target and access using these methods. Events of this nature do nevertheless offer good possibilities and can contribute greatly to building a customer-friendly image.

Virtual Tours

You could offer virtual tours. These are particularly useful for parents that live outside the area. They have been used more frequently during the Covid 19 restrictions. The tours can either be offered one to one using a mobile phone or a short film can be uploaded to the provider's Facebook/Webpage. Please make sure that you don't show any children's faces during these tours.

Local Newsletters

Take advantage of free/low-cost advertising space in local magazines or newsletters. Ask if you can write a regular article about what you are doing each term.

Printed materials

Add a QR code, linked to your website, to any printed materials that you use to promote your provision.

Websites & Facebook

As already mentioned most people turn to the internet first in order to find information. Setting up a website and using messages through Facebook can seem daunting but the fundamentals are simple.

- KISS “keep it short and simple”. People want information quickly, clearly, with no-nonsense. Make your own website easy to use and to convey your important messages. Aim for simplicity and ease of use in all functionality.
- Use [hyperlinks](#) to your website when posting messages on Facebook, Twitter etc. This makes it easy for users to click through to your website for additional information on whichever device they are using.
- A website should be like a shop. Think about it in the same way. Your shop window (home page) should make it clear what you have to offer. Access to other parts of your website should be clear and easy to understand. The experience should be warm and welcoming.
- Remove obstacles like registrations and password.
- Fancy graphics and fancy complicated design puts people off.
- Keep information up-to-date.
- Good websites will be found by most search engines - don't pay for regular submissions services
- Other sites linking to yours, such as village/town sites, will certainly improve your search engine rankings, so reciprocal links are okay, but having hundreds of irrelevant links on websites counts for very little.
- Measure your traffic, e.g. [Google Analytics](#) offers a free website tracking and analysis tool.